

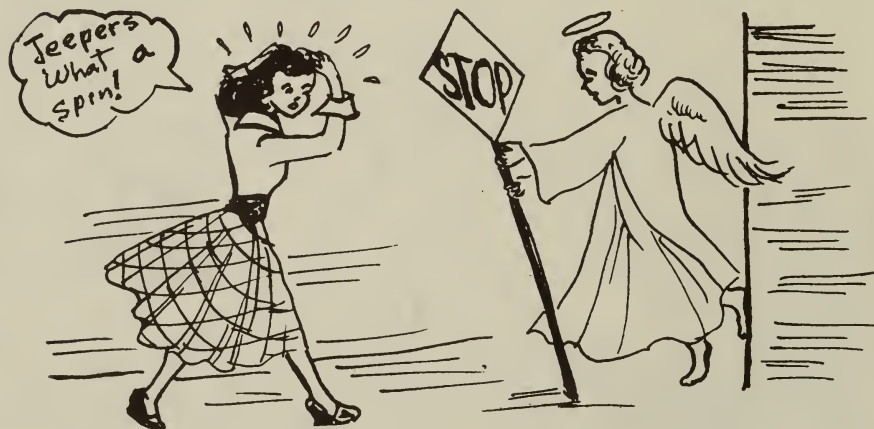
Hello There!



Hello There:

Maybe I'm rushing in where angels fear to tread. Perhaps I should go do the thing I intended to do — give myself a shampoo. But you know what? I just got to thinking that maybe there are a lot of girls who feel just as I did, and maybe they'll be glad if a stranger would explain things, and then quietly fade away (like old soldiers are supposed to do) without demanding anything in the way of thanks. You don't need to thank me — and if you don't want to read this, just tear it up. I won't know the difference.

Well — since it happened to me, it *can* happen to you.



I got into a perfect tizzy wondering about my vocation. I said to myself: "Oh, I guess every girl, at one time or another, fancies herself *called*. This will pass." But it didn't. So, to get rid of the idea, I decided to *do* something about it. I'd heard priests say that one ought to "shop around" and see different Orders before making any decision.

Now me, I didn't even feel sure I *had* a religious vocation, much less had I selected an Order. But somehow, especially when I was praying (but sometime when I was just walking around) the idea would return. Something seemed to tell me I ought to be a Sister. So I finally decided, well — no harm in taking a look at some Order. But where to turn? I didn't want to join the Sisters that taught me. Don't ask me why — I just didn't. No reason.

The idea of "shopping around" scared me. I could picture myself ringing a convent doorbell, but what would I say when a Nun answered? "Dear heart, I've come to see what I can see"? But suppose I didn't *like* what I saw? I could hardly say, "You won't do" — and depart.



I leafed through several magazines and our diocesan paper, and read invitations from different Orders. All of them said, "For further information write to Mother Superior" — or some other person. Well, I finally wrote. I can't tell you how many letters I tore up before I decided on this classic, "I would appreciate having further information on your Order." That was all. So why it should make me feel as though I were signing my life away, I don't know — but it did. Then I stood around biting my nails until the answer came. A big envelope arrived full of pamphlets, leaflets, and pictures. No letter. Well, this gave me courage to write to some other Orders. In came a flood of material that could have let me open a large Information Center.



I felt real intellectual — like I was doing research. But just the same I was doing a lot of down-to-earth thinking.

I got truly interested. This Order ran schools, this one, hospitals; another conducted both. And all of them loved God and followed a Rule of Life that brought peace and happiness.

One Saturday I got up the courage to ask my confessor if he thought I had a vocation. He told me to come and see him, which I did, and brought along the literature that pleased me most. He told me I had to make one decision at a time:

1. *Did I have a vocation to the religious life.* That, he said, was the first decision to make — and, he said it was the easier of the two because it simply meant did I love God enough to give Him my whole life in return for a hundredfold of happiness and peace here below, and perfect bliss above.

Not to over-simplify, he said, one would have to judge “by the record,” as well as by my desires. Did I, he wanted to know, have a spirit of sacrifice. That could be tested by whether or not I got out of bed in the morning and went to Mass, in all sorts of weather — just as one has to go to work every morning whether it rains or snows, or freezes, or is hot and humid.

Did I, he prodded, have the stamina to follow through on things I began, or did I give up when the going got hard. . . .

He pointed up that one got a good deal in return for small sacrifices. He pointed out the window to where people were scurrying for busses in the homeward rush hour. He said he often watched young women going to work in the morning, how they waited for busses, got pushed around, and when they arrived at work they were at the mercy of the mood of their employers; subject to a lot of jealousy, criticism, and unpleasantness. “There’s a minimum of that in convents,” he said thoughtfully; “I often wonder why every young woman doesn’t see the beauty of a Nun’s life.”

He talked to me long and seriously, and finally summed up the whole idea like this: “Do you know what it means to ‘pick up your cross daily and follow a Crucified Christ?’” He told me to meditate on those words.

2. *The choice of an Order is the second decision to make* he said, and added that the selection should be based on the kind of work I felt I’d like, and for which I seemed to have an aptitude. He really sounded wise when he said, “You know, we all change with time. I used to love teaching; now I think there is nothing in the world like parish work. Be sure to join an Order that allows for more than one choice.”

I told him that I loved social work, and in particular that I'd like to work with orphans. I said I felt an inclination towards the Daughters of Charity because they seemed to do just about everything, from the care of infants, and orphans to the very old and decrepit. "Then go and visit them before you make a final decision," he said. I told him I was scared and he said that I didn't have the stamina for a religious vocation if I was afraid to meet Nuns and then tell them "this isn't for me" if I felt that way.

So I went home and wrote a letter to the Daughters of Charity. I said that I wasn't sure I had a vocation at all, but that I loved orphans, and admired their works, and could I come for a little get-acquainted visit, because I had never really seen a live Daughter of Charity — just pictures of them. Sister answered promptly. She said I should come as her guest for a week-end. (I was glad about the "guest" part because I didn't have a bank-account, and Dad is kind of moody about money.) Sister also said she'd meet my train.

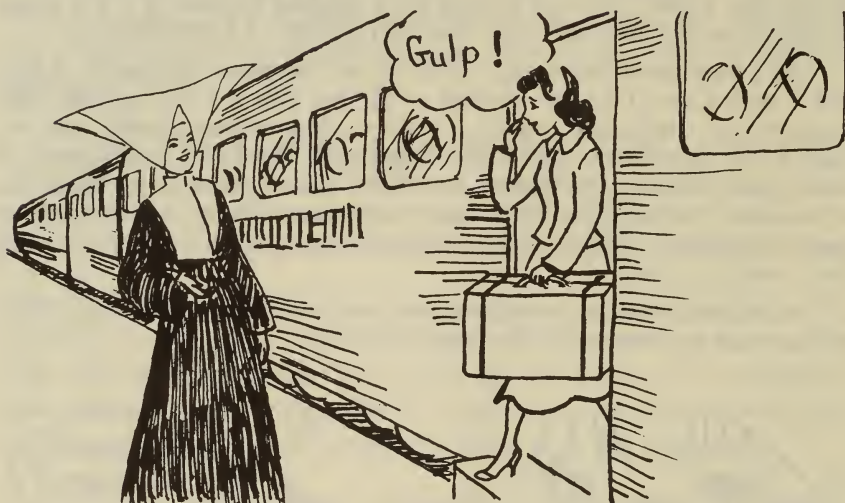
I told mother where I was going and she hit the ceiling. She said: "Why do you want to throw your life away like that?"



I said: "Like what?" because I didn't have any arguments ready, and I knew what she meant anyhow. She told me I had always wanted my own way and she supposed I was going to have it now — but she added in a menacing tone: "You won't get your own way as a Sister" and I let it go at that. I'd thought that one over anyhow.

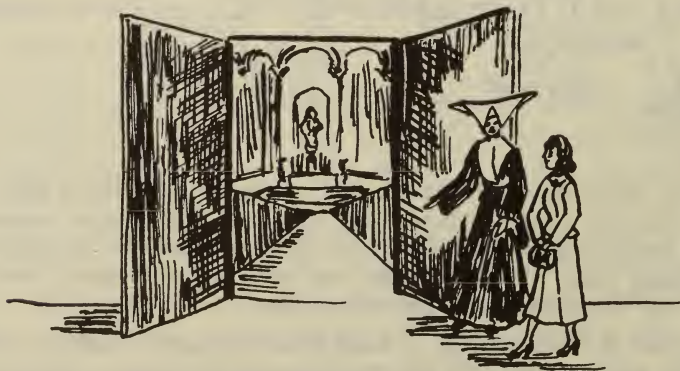
I arrived at Union Station in Saint Louis one early Saturday morning. Outside the gate I could see a big white bonnet, like I had seen in pictures of Daughters of Charity. I died several deaths wondering just what I'd

say. Heaven knows I had rehearsed my poor little introduction often enough: "Good morning, Sister, I'm the girl from — — " . . . I could have saved myself the trouble. How she ever knew me, I don't know, but when I was within a few yards of her she smiled a wide smile and said: "Would this be Sheila?"



Suddenly I felt as though I'd known her all my life. It was as easy as anything after that.

We talked and talked — for two days. And did I see sights. First Sister took me to the Central House, and the Chapel was the most beautiful I've ever seen. I knelt there a long time and just begged God to let me really *know*. Somehow I wanted more than anything else to *do* His holy Will no matter what it would cost. Nothing else was so important as just seeing things from His angle.



I came out of the Chapel wishing I could stay there forever.

Some Novices passed by. They are called Seminary Sisters and they wear the cutest outfit — black dress and white bonnet, like little Dutch Cleansers. They're darling!



They didn't look up as they passed us, which gave me a better chance to stare at them. Honestly, *nobody* has a right to look *that* peaceful in this rocky world. But they did. They looked like something right out of Heaven. I couldn't help myself, I burst right out with what was on my mind: "Sister," I said, "were *they* ever girls just like me?" Sister smiled indulgently at me as though I were a mere child: "Some of them were even more sophisticated than you, Sheila" she said with a chuckle . . . "Love can work miracles." Brother, I thought, bring out the miracles, I am going to need some. I kept staring after them like I couldn't let the sight go. Such peace. Such happiness.

Then I met several of the Superiors — you know, Important Persons. I had kind of dreaded that — Mother Superiors always seem so kind of piercing-eye, if you see what I mean. But they were just as comfortable as old shoes, cordial, informal, and — contrary to my expectations — they didn't seem at all worried as to whether I was going to "join up" or not.



They were just interested in *me*. Where did I go to school; what sports did I like; was I fond of reading. One of them even wanted to know if I liked *candy* !

Then the Sister, whom I had begun to look upon as my guardian angel, said: "Now, Sheila, let's get this straight. This visit puts you absolutely under no obligation (blessed relief!) whatsoever. It's just good Catholic education to know something about the Daughters of Charity — the first uncloistered Community in the Church." After a moment, she added: "Ask any questions you wish — and tell me anything you'd like to see." I told her I had always thought social work would appeal to me, but I'd like to see any of the activities the Sisters engaged in — so we started out on a regular Cook's tour.

First we visited a school, and we stood outside the fence watching a Sister teach a new game at recess. The little ones looked like they were in Heaven, fluttering around a big white and blue angel.



We stopped at St. Ann's Infant Home, too — and I had to be literally dragged away — there were so many things to see. In one department there are tiny babies who just beg to be hugged, they're so tiny, and sweet, and *cuddly*.



In another section of the same building there are the dearest, sweetest old ladies you ever saw. Honestly, in their way, they are just as cute and cuddly as the babies!

There was one dear old soul bobbing around in a wheel chair. She told me she was ninety-one and up until she broke her hip was in charge of square dancing. Can you tie that? Another could whistle like a bird (do birds whistle?) and all of them belonged to the Glee Club and sing like canaries.



I stayed overnight at a place called Guardian Angel Settlement. They do just about everything there. During the day, the Sisters care for the children of working mothers, darling little tots too young for school. At noon and after school, older children come in as an off-the-street-club to play, and do art, or crafts, until mother comes home from work. Gosh, I wish you could see the gratitude in the eyes of those mothers as they thank Sister for taking such good care of little John and Joe and Mary during the long day What a lot of worry those poor women are saved who must work to help support their families !



The neighborhood is in an underprivileged area of the city where young people could get into all sorts of trouble on the streets and elsewhere, because there's nothing to do around the neighborhood, no parks or play-

grounds — just cheap shows and taverns. So each evening there is a lively Teen Town Club at Guardian Angel's where the boys and girls have all sorts of activities — they sing, dance, have ping-pong tournaments, play hockey, roller skate, plan parties, and so on. They really have themselves a time — but there are also reading rooms, a place to study, and a lounge for get-togethers. Whoever thought *this* up, I thought to myself, really understands what kids need.



I thought I had seen just about everything by the time I got to DePaul Hospital. Aren't Nurses keen, though, in their crisp, white uniforms? I think they're positively enticing. When one thinks of all the good a Sister-Nurse can do for sick people whose souls may be sick, too — one wonders! But the place that really sent me was St. Vincent's Hospital for the mentally ill. Gee, I saw some teen-age patients there... That started me down the road of Serious Thought, and I mean *serious* thought. If it is a noble thing to cure a person's body, what about his *mind*?



Gosh... the whole gamut of service, I thought: Infants, so helpless and so darling. Girls and boys to be shaped into good citizens, for this world and the next. Old people with life behind them, yet a lonely stretch ahead. Settlement Houses where worried mothers can find relief from anxiety. Sick people, orphans, young girls in need of counsel. Whew! What a lot needs doing in this world...

I wasn't ready for a decision yet, but I was certainly piling up a lot of impressions.

"Sister," I said: "What's the first step after one enters the Order? Where does one go first?" Sister told me the very first place one went was to St. Philomena's, the House of Postulants — and she asked if I wanted to see it. Did I! So we went. There were about thirty girls there — postulants — and after introducing me, Sister left me alone with them. "Ask any questions you like," she said on parting, "they can probably answer you better than I can."



You'd think getting acquainted with thirty people at one time would be difficult; but no, they all began talking at once, laughing and joking — exactly like the kids back at school. I felt a little feeble on questions, but one of them said: "Why don't we just tell you what we *do* — that's what I wanted to know before I came."



She outlined her day: it was a broad schedule, prayers, chores, recreation. I seized on the word recreation. "Tell me about your simple little

joys" I said, with a catch in my throat. I didn't want to be cynical, but after all, what was there to do — sew? knit? Play tiddleywinks?

They laughed in a spontaneous chorus. "Just like me" I heard one of them whisper in the ear closest to her. But they didn't play tiddleywinks. I found they had an excellent basket-ball team. (I played and didn't make a single basket. But then I was a little nervous, so to speak.) They played a neat game of indoor baseball — out in the yard — but I wanted to talk. I got a hold of one girl that looked like she had a lot on the ball: "How can you be *sure*?"

I asked this a little timidly; after all it's a pretty personal question. She knew exactly what I meant. "You sound just like me six months ago," she said. "You know you really and truly can't be sure until you just do some straight thinking. After all, there are more than forty thousand Daughters of Charity. I just thought, 'well how can *they* be any surer than I' — and if forty thousand can do it, well, for Pete's sake, why should I be the exception?"

I gave a start at the word "Pete" — that was his name. She saw me color. For a moment we were both a little embarrassed. I was the first to recover. "Well — what does one do about — Pete?" She giggled a delightful, real-life giggle. But her eyes were sober and kind. She understood my problem and she wasn't making light of it. "Look, Honey," she said briefly, "Pete's just the giving up of someone *dear* for Someone *dearer*!"



She couldn't have put it neater. A bell rang from somewhere and, flashing me a smile, she said, "The Voice of God" and was gone. I stood just where she left me, murmuring to myself, "... the giving up of someone dear — for Someone dearer."

I repeated this phrase to Sister, later. She expanded it. "Yes, Sheila, vocation is like that. It's really the giving up of many things dear — for Someone dearer. There is a positive side: how much can you do for our Lord, for His poor, for those in need . . . How much can you do for the sanctification of your own soul. But, inexorably, a corollary follows: how much can you do *without*." She let that sink in. We were both silent a long time.



"What does one have to give up?" I asked the question lamely because, in a general way, I knew. Maybe I dreaded the answer. Sister was almost casual, as if these things had long since ceased to matter to her: "Oh, worldly pleasure . . . ease, admiration, family, friends, home . . . One has to relinquish personal dreams of human love, of having one's own children, one's own home."

Suddenly I was happy, all lit up inside. "But look what you *get*," I said. "For human love — something *divine*. For not having children of your own, *hundreds* of orphans, or abandoned babies with no one to care for them! For your own parents, how many old and forsaken people that the world tosses aside . . ."



I was really getting eloquent. Sister stopped me with a slow smile and a twinkle in her eye . . . "And for *Pete* — God."

I had long, long thoughts on the train going home. I certainly had



one thing clear. A “right intention” meant giving up *for the love of God* the legitimate and secret dreams one has of human joys. The point was, could I do it? “It is not only a question of what you can *do*,” I mused, “but what you can do *without* !”

I returned again and again to what Sister had said about strength of character and a disciplined will. A religious vocation is not for the conceited, frivolous mind, nor for the ‘I-will-today-I-won’t-tomorrow-depending-upon-how-I-feel’ type. But gee, I don’t suppose anyone ever *feels* like making a sacrifice. At least, *I* don’t. What was it Sister had said: *Feelings don’t matter*. Ah me !



But a person is usually willing to make sacrifices for something he really wants. The question began to boil down to this: “Do I really *want* our Lord — the way He wanted *me* by creating me, and redeeming me, and *dying* for me?” How far was I willing to go for Him?

My thoughts kept churning round and round like that.

Mother says I was never the same after that visit to the Daughters of Charity. But, neither was she. I knew I had changed: two days later, right at Mass and Holy Communion, I made up my mind. This was it. Heaven and earth could not change me; I didn't care what *anybody* said. But mother herself had changed. She seemed to have a new respect for me. She said, "Sheila, I believe you're really serious . . . What's more, I believe you'll really make it!" I hope and pray she's right. But gee . . . there's something I'll always remember about mother and dad. Dad told me to "go get what I needed" and there was a real tear in his eye and a big bill in my hand. But Mom really talked to me.

One night I sat on her bed and we talked for hours. She said: "Any-



thing we do worthwhile, costs . . . And Sheila that's true no matter what state of life you choose. Peace can never be found apart from duty. I'm *glad* my little girl has a brave heart." Gee, it was grand to hear mother talk that way — and I had one for her, too. "Know what Father Hubert told me, Mother? He said that any girl who leaves father and mother and homes and lands (I have no land, but boy, wotta home!) for My Name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold of happiness in this world, and eternal glory in the next. And right after *that*, Mother, he said: 'And, Sheila, every father and mother that gives a son or daughter to God goes straight to Heaven! Doesn't it follow that if God loves the little daughter enough to make her His Bride, that He must love even *more* the parents who reared her in high ideals and virtue?' That's what Father said. So, Mom — and you be sure to tell Dad, too — I am your *ticket* to Heaven!"

We've laughed and cried together a lot, these last few days, mother and I. We giggle at the silliest things . . . and then we start crying . . . and we hug each other as though we'll never let go. Precious memories-to-be!

Mom was tickled pink when I told her that although *I* couldn't come home, the Rules permit her and Dad to come as often as they like. "Gee, Mom" I said — trying to be flippant to hide my true feelings, "you'll see

me in all stages . . . First I'll be dressed as a postulant, then as a Seminary Sister, and then — and then —"



Mom started to giggle and it turned to a sob, so she said kind of gruff-like: "Oh, get on with your packing!" But I could see she was thrilled, too. So me, I bent over the trunk — and a tear fell in! Right on top of the box marked **BLACK HOSE**.



Mom was surprised at what little I had to bring. "Not much," I said, "but what there is — is funny." I'm leaving tomorrow morning, so that's why I gotta say 'Bye now.'

Affectionately,

Sheila

If you are interested in the further adventures of Shiela, write for the leaflet,
Miss Barrett, Postulant

SISTER OLIVA, St. Margaret's Hospital
90 Cushing Ave., Dorchester, Mass.